

# From NAM to Numb

*By AT2 Erik Neff*

“Just another wire check,” was what we were thinking when we went out to the flight line to do a release-and-control check on aircraft 411 at the end of the flight schedule. We had been off the boat for about two months, just having done our share in Operation Iraqi Freedom. I had received a NAM the day before for doing wire checks on cruise. We seemed to have everything going for us, but it wouldn’t turn out that way.

A typical Virginia Beach summer day greeted us as we went in for our night-check shift. The base was in thunder condition one. Our aircraft were stuck in Cherry Point because



A dented drop-tank is a sure sign of trouble.

of a line of thunderstorms to the south. They made it back just in time to hot seat to another event. Our wire checks for the night were flying, so we decided to wait out the schedule in the shop. Our team that night consisted of two airmen, another AT2, and me. With the exception of one airman, this was the same team I had on cruise. The second airman never had done a wire check before and was in training.

Our first jet landed at 2145, and we headed out to set up test equipment, while our squadron ordies downloaded and de-armed the aircraft. Originally, I was not going to be the team leader for this job; I was going to perform the cockpit procedures. The other AT2 was designated as the lead. As we finished the set up for our wire check, the other AT2 headed inside for “I” cables. He mentioned only that he was going to get cables. I assumed no discrepancies existed because he hadn’t mentioned any. At that point, the AOs were downloading a TACTS pod from the wing tip, and, as soon as they were done, they left the jet and moved on to the next one.

I climbed into the cockpit, and one of the airmen applied power to the aircraft. After about five minutes of waiting, the experienced airman and I grew impatient, so we traded out positions. I grabbed a checklist and took over as team leader. I gave the new airman training on how to use the AWM-54 test set and directed the other airman to push emergency jettison.

Suddenly, we heard a loud “BOOM!” and a noticeable “THUD!” It sounded like a shotgun

going off. I looked toward the centerline drop tank and saw it bouncing off the deck. The airman in the cockpit had no idea what just had happened. I told him to shut off power and to get out of the jet, while I secured the A/M32A-108 electrical-power unit.

What went wrong? If we had followed the aircraft preparation procedures in the checklist, this whole incident would have been averted. However, we knew more mistakes had to have been made to blow that drop-tank. We learned the AT's bible for wire checks, A1-F18AE-LWS-000, and the squadron SOP mandates that three qualified people be in place for any wire check. We originally met that requirement, but then the team leader went inside.

The weight of a dropped tank can do serious damage.



We should have waited for him to return, but we were too impatient. The Conventional Release-Systems-Test School teaches that the team leader does not do any work. That person stands back and makes sure the team members follow every step in the checklist. A third item missed was the squadron SOP. It states the ordnance shop first must sign the aircraft-discrepancy book, signifying the aircraft is safe for any major maintenance. The ordies never had a chance to sign it, and we never even checked it.

This mishap was a perfect example of why team leaders never should be switched in the middle of a job. Things could have been worse. We were lucky no one was near the tank when it blew, and it nearly was empty after landing. The tank didn't start a fire or crack and leak fuel into the nearby drain. My pride took a huge hit, and I no longer am certified to do release-and-control certifications, but that's a small price to pay when I think about the possible injury or death of a shipmate.

I learned more from this incident than any other event in my career—more than I ever thought possible. I had a pretty good reputation in the squadron before this mishap, and I still do. However, I now have to work a lot harder to gain back people's trust. Going from NAM to numb, I know the only way to do a job is the right way, and I make sure everyone around me realizes the dangers and does the same. It takes a little longer, but time is a sacrifice we all can afford.



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In this case, a few dents and some cosmetic damage occurred when the tank fell.

